

Freedom on Earth: An Ethnographic Study of Hyde Park's University Church

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Abstract

Despite growing secularization and the retreat of religion into private life (Chaves & Anderson, 2014), religious identity and belief continue to have a significant influence on social justice action for many Americans (Ammerman, 2013). This article explores the relationship between religion and social justice action through an ethnographic study of University Church in Hyde Park, Chicago. It traces how social justice is talked about among congregants and how it is embodied through the church service. The analysis reveals how the language congregants and leaders use around social justice problematizes common binaries of sacred and secular, illuminating the often complex relationship between religiously motivated beliefs and progressive values. The racial diversity of the church itself allows members to embody these principles of social justice, but in ways that expand traditional understandings of the relationship between faith and social justice.

University Church sits on the corner of 57th Street and University Avenue in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago. Its structure is quasi-gothic, with a stone staircase and large heavy doors. The crimson red brick is adorned with politically provocative posters and slogans. One sign reads, "Black Lives Matter," and another, "Equal Access for All God's Children." In the yard lies a blue picket sign saying, "Pray for Justice for Laquan." Other signs proclaim the church as a welcoming space. Rainbow banners signify solidarity

with the LGBTQ+ community. Founded in 1894, University Church has existed through politically charged periods that range from desegregation, through the Civil Rights era, to decades of “urban renewal.” In 1980, University Church, with a largely white congregation at the time, merged with a predominantly African American church that was struggling to support its congregation.

University Church is now part of the New Sanctuary Movement and has housed undocumented families. The front of the church features a narrow staircase leading up to bright, red gothic doors, over which a banner announces the “Sanctuary Café,” a space where college students, activists, and community members come to work, eat, sip, and meet. It indeed evokes a feeling of security and sanctity. Through the red gothic doors lies the Anglican-styled sanctuary with vaulted ceilings and stone walls. The flying arches help lend the space its rich acoustics. Stained glass windows, electric candles, and chandeliers create its light. There are four sections of pews that face the pulpit—two in the front and one on the left and right side, each lined with red cushions. In front is an adorned communion table. New Culture Hymnals are placed in each row. Sharpened pencils lay next to blank offering slips.

Over the past two decades, the United States has become increasingly secular. Surveys from the Public Religion Research Institute (2017) and the National Congregation Study (Chaves & Anderson, 2014) attest to the growing number of people who indicate they are non-religious. Weber (1980) saw secularization as a process of demystification and rationalization, a process through which religious identification was replaced by humanistic institutions. Within the trend of secularization has come a retreat of religion from the public civil sphere to the private sphere (Chaves & Anderson, 2014). Some churches have responded to secularization by bringing social issues into religious space. This response has come from both evangelical (Zerai, 2010) and progressive congregations (Wood, 1999).

While evangelicals share little theological commonality with progressive congregations, both have been prompted to engage with public and political issues in order to remain relevant (Zerai, 2010). Evangelicalism is traditionally aligned with culturally and politically conservative values (Harder, 2014). However, a growing number of evangelical churches are embracing the importance of social justice (Gassaway, 2014; Gardner, 2018). Progressive churches typically adopt secular values and pursue social justice issues as key elements of their congregational identity and practice (Todd & Allen, 2011). They embrace actions and values related to causes. Delehanty (2016) describes this trend in terms of pastors and ministers using racial bridging practice, political education, and community involvement, all in order to move their congregation to engage in issues of systemic injustice.

Another way of understanding this is to consider what Reinhold Niebuhr describes as Christian realism, or the balance between the counter-cultural imperative of the Christian message and the political realities and processes of the world as it is (McKeogh, 2007). Niebuhr contends that since power exists, and since humans are imperfect, the only way to live out Christian ideals is to engage in political discourse. Faith is the hope that you are able to live out Christian values in a deeply ambiguous world (Kapic & McCormack, 2012).

University Church provides an excellent opportunity to explore these dynamics because it situates itself within this stream of progressive Christianity. This essay asks, therefore, what are the ways that social justice is used and talked about in the congregation and how is it embodied within the congregation? As Lichterman (2008) points out, the elasticity of the term “social justice” means that any interrogation about social justice must be sensitive to the variety of ways it is used (Ammerman, 2003). I argue that beyond talking about social justice and providing activities and networks to participate in social justice activities (Todd & Allen, 2011), the service itself provides a way for congregants to embody these values. This is due

first to the demographic makeup of the congregation, but also the practices established in the service.

The language used around social justice in the church problematizes binaries of sacred and secular. This fusion also takes place in the service as social justice becomes embodied and enacted.

Methodology

I used participant-observation to collect data during four field site visits to the church. I visited Sunday mornings between 10:30 a.m. and 12:15 p.m. and stayed for the social hour that followed each service. My method of documenting these observations was through handwritten field notes in a journal. I performed two in-depth interviews with one young adult congregant, and with senior pastor, Julian DeShazier (the names of informants and congregational members have all been changed to protect confidentiality while Pastor Julian has been preserved because he is a public figure). These interviews each lasted 45 minutes and were semistructured. In addition to in-depth interviews, I collected conversations I had with congregants both during service and afterward at the social hour. Finally, I collected church bulletins that provide service outlines, announcements, and special events.

I used the Outline of Cultural Materials (OCM) suggested by Dewalt and Dewalt (2002) to begin the process of coding. I placed field notes and interviews into three columns: 1) field notes; 2) codes; and 3) reflections (Davies, 2008). After reading through all my field notes, four categories emerged: 1) church processes; 2) activities in the church; 3) mission and values of church members and leaders; and 4) the setting of the church. The first group of items incorporates codes that deal with congregants' interactions with each other. I coded for a variety of interactions (verbal, non/verbal, physical touch, physical space, etc.) and themes related to dynamics in the congregation (old vs. new, tensions, feelings of harmony, etc.). This category is meant to capture the way people talked about other congregants and ideas about church participation. The second

category relates to the programming of the church, activities advertised at the church, volunteer opportunities, and social justice awareness. I chose this category to capture elements of the service itself and better understand what activities were frequently talked about.

The third category relates to the mission of the church and the perceptions of congregants. I chose social justice to code because of the frequency of use. This made me curious about all the different ways people talked about social justice, and I used this information to build a semantic range. Another code, Theological beliefs, helped categorize how congregants, lay leaders, and pastors talked about theology. After gathering general themes, I coded for sub-categories within theological belief. For example, every sermon included at least one aspect of liberation theology, which is a belief that God is on the side of the oppressed and actively working to liberate people (Gutierrez, 2003). Sometimes these theological beliefs were explicitly named, other times they served as a backdrop for action. Finally, the fourth code related to the church itself as a material structure and symbolically as a religious institution. Items in this category also represent the symbolic setting of the church and what it means in the context of a congregation.

I originally assumed that I could dissect the ways in which sacred and secular language were being used that would fit neatly into categories. However, the process of coding revealed the theological and secular ways of talking about social justice were part of a complex situation that resisted the sacred/secular dichotomy.

Rationale for Collection

I used participant observation because it allowed me to see how congregants interacted with each other in a natural way and provided rich data on how social justice principles were enacted in the service. By placing myself in the service for four weeks, I began to establish rapport with congregants and even had one woman ask me, “when are you going to become a member already?!” In-depth

interviews were helpful because they allowed me to probe deeper into the beliefs and experiences of key informants. I wanted to get a sample from a congregant that is involved in the church and a leader in the church in order to compare their perspectives on social justice in the church.

Data and Analysis

Social Justice Language

My first service at University Church was right before Columbus Day. A man with thin gray hair and a long white beard shuffled up to the microphone. He listed off the scourges of colonialism and asserted the need for global solidarity. “We should not be saying God bless America,” he punctuated, “but God DAMN Columbus Day!” With this conclusion, the congregation erupted in “amens” and applause. Pastor Julian is African American, born and raised on the South Side of Chicago. He is both an academic and an activist, splitting his time between managing the field education for McCormick seminary, pastoring University Church, and maintaining his hip-hop career as rapper, J.Kwest. Pastor Julian describes himself as “a systems guy” and his leadership style fits into what Delehanty (2016) refers to as “sustained activism,” which is an attempt to address inequality through systemic transformation and long-term community change. Answering a question about how the church decides what activities to get involved in he says:

A lot of people get excited and energized and as a leader, I want to have systems in place. A lot of churches are “moment” churches—we are looking at the long-term.

His sermons and announcements are filled with explanations of injustice that stem from systemic oppression. In one sermon, he links neighborhood violence to “heroin, police funding, and the drug trade.” In the same sermon, he argues the suffering of Puerto Rico is

due to global warming and condemns financial companies for “swooping in to save the day for pennies on a dollar.”

As we sit down to enjoy fruit and coffee after service, I ask one woman how the congregation has changed over the last 10 years. She says:

It has changed a lot. They didn't have Pastor Julian before. I attribute a lot of the change to leadership. There were people who were involved here before, but it didn't feel the same. I can't really put the words to it. It feels fuller. There is something about it in the air.

When she finishes talking, she is asked by the woman across the table hanging up a “voting facts” blurb if she is missing any information. She replies, “No, I think you have it all.” She turns to me and says, “Party politics we shouldn't have in the church. But politics should definitely be in the church.” Another example of system-level language around social justice involves finances. One Sunday, a lanky man with glasses and a sweater takes to the stage to announce the need to start a “finance committee at the church.” Anticipating an aversion to talking about money in a church, he says:

I know it is difficult to talk about money, but we need to do better. We need to look at sexism, racism, and capitalism and stare it down-in our lives and in the church.

From the pulpit to the pocketbook, everything is interrogated through this lens of systems of injustice.

One of the strategies of liberal progressive churches has been to shy away from exclusively Christian language (Zerai, 2010). This is not the case at University Church. There is a dynamic of the secular and the sacred. For example, while declaring the root cause of Puerto Rico's suffering to be climate change and U.S. neglect, Pastor Julian argues that “the church in Puerto Rico has ‘seen the face of God’ and continues to wrestle with God.”

This tension between the sacred and the political is brought out during an interview with one young adult leader in the congregation. When asked about the role her faith plays in social justice, she challenges my attempt to dichotomize faith and action. Instead, she claims that she sees faith and social justice as inseparable:

Everything we do as human beings. Everything we build is supposed to be done to the glory of God. And bringing the kingdom of God down to earth and making that a reality here on earth. So this idea of the separation of church and state. It's not a separation of God and state. It's a separation of very specific beliefs, and we know that God is a pluralistic God and that there needs to be space for everyone. What you go back to are these core tenants of belief which are Justice and Mercy.

All these examples point to the complex dance of religious and secular language. In one sentence, Pastor Julian claims that the call of God goes "beyond citizenship." Yet, later he implores the congregation to be "good informed citizens of God" by showing up to the court to push for a consent decree. The interchangeableness of divine and humanistic language problematizes the binary of sacred and secular and dives into an ambiguity that American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr called Christian realism, which requires "preserving a sense of responsibility for achieving the highest measure of order, freedom, and justice despite the hazards of man's collective life" (McKeogh, 2007, p. 129).

Elements of the Service

For all the contemporary activism the church is engaged in, it is still remarkably traditional in terms of the rites, rituals, and elements of the service; the hymnody and prayer. It is precisely in some of these elements of the service that the mix of divine and secular language emerges. This is most salient during communal prayer.

Time in each service is given for congregants to raise both their concerns and their praises. A deacon circles the room smoothly

beckoning through the microphone “prayers? prayers? anyone?” The piano in the background sprinkles jazzed notes into the slow marching of the organ. Two musical worlds are woven and fused to the simple, repetitive structure of a *Taizé* chant —“Oh Lord hear our prayer.” Against this background, prayers are offered. While some members share concerns for healing, new jobs, and surgeries, many make prayer requests about social justice issues. One man asks for justice for the employees of the neighborhood Treasure Island grocery store, which is going out of business. Another asks for peace and reconciliation on the Korean peninsula. A third congregant notes the ongoing conflict in El Salvador and asks for a prayer for the communities there. Equal importance is given to both kinds of prayer as congregants affirm, “Oh Lord hear our prayer” at the end of each request.

The most common qualifier to prayer concerns is: “but God is good.” For instance, Grecia, who runs the Sanctuary Café, offers a “praise and prayer request” one Sunday. Through held-back tears she shares:

I just really need to admit today that I’m tired, church. I’m just so tired. But this is also a praise because God is doing so many great things.

Other petitioners display a similar pattern. One follows up their delay in back surgery with “but God is good.” Another congregant prays for a job and ends their petition by saying “but I know God is good.” One explanation for this apparent contradiction might be that congregants’ attempt to qualify their statements in order to indicate their continued devotion and save face. Another reason might be a cognitive dissonance (Dewalt, 2002) that reflects a deeper ambivalence about the presence of the divine. What both explanations lack is the possibility that these ideas live together. The qualifier that this is also a “praise” illustrates that both suffering and divine work do not need to be exclusive.

Theodicy, an attempt to reconcile the goodness of the divine with the existence of evil, is one of the greatest dilemmas in theology (Kapic &

McCormack, 2012). One attempt to resolve this dilemma is liberation theology (Gutierrez, 2002). Heavily influenced by the work of the Brazilian educator Paulo Freire, Peruvian theologian Gustavo Gutierrez believes that God is active in the liberation of the oppressed and displays a preferential treatment of the poor (Gutierrez, 2002). Black Liberation theologian James Cone's extraordinary work, *The Cross and the Lynching Tree* (2011), brings this theological prospect to the suffering of African Americans in the United States. Cone utilizes the symbol of the cross to argue that God is revealed in the suffering of the oppressed and draws a striking parallel with lynching. Cone (2011) writes that:

It is precisely until we can see the cross and the lynching tree together, until we can identify Christ with a "recrucified" black body hanging from a lynching tree, there can be no genuine understanding of Christian identity in America, and no deliverance from the brutal legacy of slavery and white supremacy. (p. 34)

For Cone, and for members of University Church, these prayers reveal a belief that God is not only concerned about suffering and societal injustice, but that God is present amid the suffering.

Em[body]ing Faith

Beyond how congregants and leaders talk about social justice is the question of how these principles are lived out in the church. At a demographic level, the church prompts a setting where social justice can be carried out. The integration of a black and white congregation answers Martin Luther King's indictment that 11:00 am on Sunday was the nation's "most segregated hour." A congregation member points this out when telling the story of the merger:

Like, we have a soul food potluck that we started doing many years ago when two congregations merged. One was a historically white congregation the other was a historically black congregation. And they wanted to do that, because it was the black congregation that was coming into the congregation and they wanted them to feel

welcome and that is a big tradition that happens every year now. And it has its roots in this kind of idea of reconciliation and racial justice.

In this context, the sharing of food opens into a new tradition. In the same way, "Pass the peace," where members physically pass peace to each other through handshakes, is not just a spiritual greeting, but an act of racial reconciliation (Wuthnow, 2003). This is important because it brings up the notion of embodiment central to the preaching and theology of the church. The Western Judeo-Christian tradition tends to emphasize the platonic idea of dualism, which treats the body as only a vessel for the soul and an obstacle to be overcome (Olson, 2013; Kapic & McCormack, 2012). University Church, however operates closer to the ideas and insights of the French phenomenologist Merleau-Ponty, who conceives of embodiment as the affirmation that human experience is fundamentally physical and material (Hitchcock, 2008).

Pastor Julian affirms this idea in a sermon on Luke 22:19 where Jesus declares to his disciples during the last supper, "take this and eat. This is my body, broken for you." A few weeks before, a pastor from a Quechua village came to speak for Latinx History Month. Pastor Julian reminds the congregation that the pastor's village had been destroyed by the Spanish, who brought colonialism *and* communion. The traditional idea of a priest is someone who remains anonymous because they are in *persona Christi* (in the person of Christ). Pastor Julian finds this idea anemic at best, and violent at worst. He believes *who* is giving communion is just as important as the communion itself. It is of utmost importance that "the hands holding the cup are the ones who had their village erased by Christianity!" Pastor Julian implores the congregation to embrace an embodied understanding:

What if the signs and symbols both matter. What if the body matters just as much? We must take the body seriously. We must take back our bodies. Many glorified God but ignored racism. Jesus said, "take my body!"

The sermon is followed by quiet reflection as Pastor Julian's words linger and bodies sit firmly rooted in the pews. Pastor Julian points out during one sermon that liberation and freedom are not meant for the next life but now: "Freedom on EARTH, as it is in heaven" he exclaims. This is a far cry from revivalist preaching about people being raptured from a decaying and hellish earth. This is a spirituality of rock, earth, and soil; a spirituality that sees more than a soul and asks for justice for a black body that was, in Cone's horrific reminder, discarded, murdered, and slain. This is a Christianity where being human matters.

The service always concludes with a benediction where everyone holds hands and sings "the Lord bless you and keep you. And make his/her face to shine upon you." This blessing is usually sung happily, and the atmosphere is energetic and welcoming. Young children sway back and forth. Congregants look around and smile at one another, singing along familiar and comfortable. Young adults and older people hold hands, smiling at each other, and laugh, filling the space with warmth. They leave the service to go about their daily lives of grocery stores, coffee shops, and appointments.

Discussion

This project explored the ways that University Church frames and talks about social justice. It found how much these languages co-exist, the systems framework (secular) and spiritual framework integrated in what Todd and Allen (2011) highlight as a "paradoxical" relationship between religion and social justice. In investigating the relationship between social justice and spirituality, race emerged as a central issue. Race was frequently discussed during the service and many of the groups and opportunities offered in the church related to issues of racial injustice. This is not surprising given the history of the congregational merger, Hyde Park's continued battles with segregation and racial injustice, and the national discourse around race in America.

This is not to say that University Church does not face challenges in practicing racial justice. One member recounted the difficulty of embodying the purported values of the Church during flashpoint events, such as when a grand jury in St. Louis County declined to charge Ferguson, Mo. police officer Darren Wilson in the shooting death of unarmed teenager, Michael Brown, which gave cause to the protest cry that “Black Lives Matter”:

After the verdict came out in St. Louis. One member of the church, *who had been in the church for a long time* [stated with emphasis]. White guy. Got up and said, “all lives matter.” And woah. There are people who are nodding along with that, right?

Despite these differences, the church stayed committed to conversation and dialogue by inviting members of Black Lives Matter to come and speak:

And we had a conversation with some Black Lives Matter advocates and they basically said, “This is a young people’s movement. A young people of color’s movement. Specifically, black people. And if you want to support this, you need to follow our lead.” And the church did.

This example highlights that a commitment to social justice does not mean the church is homogenous in its beliefs. However, it does mean that people are willing to engage in dialogue and as this congregant put it, “willing to learn and change.”

This is one of the great contributions University Church makes for other congregations. Willingness to engage in discourse and the ability to change and grow are not typically associated with religious institutions that tend to prize tradition and orthodoxy (Delehanty, 2016). What is unique about University Church is its ability to embrace its very particular social and political context and wrestle with questions about larger social issues. Paul Tillich (1996), who towards the end of his life taught at the divinity school at University of Chicago, calls this the method of *correlation*. For Tillich, it is our search for meaning and our experience of our own humanity that

drive the questions that theology answers. These “ultimate concerns” as Tillich calls them, are always evolving as we are embedded in a world of injustice, oppression, and existential uncertainty. University Church does this by wrestling both theologically and socially in the context it is placed.

There is a concern that “social justice” has become fashionable, a recognizable selling point institutions and churches use as recruitment strategies—attracting younger members to join and engage. As Zerai (2010) notes, even evangelical churches are engaging more in social justice issues in order to remain relevant. Interviews with new members hint at this when asked about why they decided to attend University Church. One congregant says: “I’m looking for a church that is LGBTQ+ affirmative and social justice oriented and when I saw the signs I knew this was the church for me.” While there is nothing wrong with acknowledging it is both a matter of relevance and a matter of values for University Church, as more churches seek to engage in social justice, this question will continue to be asked.

Further questions include what resources congregations have for contributing to social justice efforts. More research can be done perhaps using a racial equity framework (Garces & Gordon da Cruz, 2017) to assess the degree congregations are able to achieve racial equity. Another question is the role of leadership in moving congregations towards social justice. Delehanty (2016), and this ethnography, focused largely on the role of leaders, but future projects can explore what strategies congregants and lay people use to engage in these issues. Finally, how does participation in social justice impact membership and participation in the congregation? As more and more churches are closing and many millennials are distancing themselves from participation in churches, this question becomes increasingly relevant.

Conclusion

At a time in which secularization is increasing and the role of faith is being withdrawn into private life, University Church offers a unique synthesis of progressive secular values and spiritual motivations for social justice. The need to categorize and separate these two sources of belief and action formation does an injustice to the paradox and complexity of not only religious belief but the function of belief itself. University Church reminds us that we are all an amalgamation of the world through which we pass. The church itself is a part of a larger social and political context that informs its decisions and activities. For churches like University Church, there is a crucial element of transformative action in order to allow members to live out their diverse values. As religion in America is shifting, more churches are deciding how they are going to engage in the world. For University Church, this means a commitment to transformative action in the community and beyond. As Pastor Julian reminded us one Sunday, Jesus taught us to pray for “freedom on earth, as it is in heaven.”

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